



# DEXTER COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

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November 16, 2021

Dear DCS Families,

I'm writing today to update the entire DCS community on upcoming changes at DCS. One of the greatest strengths of our school district is that we have incredible leaders, teachers, staff, students, and community. As an organization, these strengths allow us to be extremely nimble and responsive to the changing environments while always supporting our students.

As we've moved through the past two school years, we have continued to support our students and to always do what is best for our kids. Our leaders, teachers, staff and other adults find creative solutions to what sometimes feels like a list of never-ending challenges in order to do what is best for our kids on a daily basis. We will continue to provide the quality of education our community expects for our students despite the staffing challenges across the country and the pandemic.

We fully acknowledge that there are factors outside of the control of our school district that impact us all. We are committed to these challenges never negatively impacting our kids. Challenges are not an excuse to be unresponsive or apathetic. Instead, DCS will focus on utilizing our strengths to best support our students. DCS is extremely nimble and our team members are always willing to take whatever role necessary to make us the strongest team for kids.

The 2021-2022 school year is more challenging than previous years in a variety of ways for every individual, community, and school district in the country. We're locally (and nationally) short-staffed and there is no end in sight for this problem. Organizations that believe they can continue to do what they've always done will be left in a constant state of triage. Administrators and office staff work into the night on matrixing out coverage only to wake up the next day with a whole new set of staffing obstacles due to absences. Our district staff has done an amazing job filling vacancies with very few options. You may have noticed that neighboring districts have had shutdowns due to personnel. The only reason Dexter has not had to look at this option is because of the selfless dedication and willingness to go the extra mile of our staff in the best interest of kids.

As a school district, we believe we need to approach this staffing issue and our organizational structure in a proactive manner and create new solutions to providing the best education for our students. We are fortunate to have an incredible team. With recent retirements (and announcements of retirements), our team members are changing. This requires us to use our existing members in different roles that meet the immediate and long-term needs of our organization while building capacity for our future. The past two years have been extremely hard on school leaders and it is not surprising to see that individuals are looking to retire or move into new positions. This phenomenon is mirrored in all careers around the country. We want to retain as much of our leadership as we can at Dexter and part of that means providing new opportunities to provide new challenges.

The following plan allows us to use our team members in areas of strengths to help DCS best serve the needs of our community and kids while building long-term capacity that will benefit DCS kids and the community post-pandemic.

## **Need #1: Mill Creek Principal Needs:**

Jami Bronson, Mill Creek Principal, recently announced her retirement effective at the end of January. This requires DCS to make a mid-year move to lead Mill Creek Middle School. Ken Koenig, current DHS Assistant Principal, will move to lead Mill Creek Middle School as the Interim Middle School Principal. Ken Koenig is an outstanding educational leader with decades of proven school leadership experience. He's committed to school culture and kids. Mr. Koenig is an experienced administrator who can seamlessly transition mid-year to Mill Creek and provide the immediate leadership to continue moving Mill Creek forward in continuously improving our education for kids. Ken Keonig and Brett Pedersen will be a great team leading Mill Creek Middle School.

As Mr. Koenig transitions to Mill Creek, David Teddy will move to DHS as the Interim High School Assistant Principal. David Teddy has been the Community Education Director leading Jenkins Early Childhood Learning Center, Community Education, Summer Programming, and After-care for many years. Last year, Mr. Teddy served as a member of the Research and Development Team to create the SPARK program at DCS. Prior to moving into an administrative role, Mr. Teddy taught at both Mill Creek and Dexter High School. He brings with him a wealth of knowledge and experience in a variety of leadership roles that will support the current and future needs of DHS.

We will be working on a plan to fill Mr. Teddy's current role at Community Education and will announce the plan in coming weeks.

## **Needs #2, 3, 4: Creating New Solutions to Our Staffing Crisis, Building Long-term Leadership Capacity, and Delivering on Promises to our Voters/Community:**

Principal for Operations: Effective in January, Craig McCalla (Anchor Principal) will move to a new position titled Principal for Operations. Craig McCalla knows every aspect of how DCS operates. He knows the entire organization as well as anyone in our district and is uniquely able to help us address a variety of high-priority needs that cannot wait any longer to be addressed. His responsibilities will include:

- The 2017 Bond was structured in 2 Series. Series 1 was scheduled to be completed around now. After completion of Series 1, the sales of the Series 2 bonds provide funding for nearly \$17 million of additional work that was approved by voters. Mr. McCalla will be responsible for facilitating nearly \$3 million of remaining Series 1 Bond work from the 2017 bond that was postponed by the pandemic. This includes essential projects like completing lingering punch-list items, pool repairs, bleachers, updating the CPA technology, boilers, water heaters, parking lot projects, and a list of high-priority projects that were part of the 2017 bond. Series 1 bond work must be completed before Series 2 (approximately \$17 million also passed by voters in 2017) can begin. The pandemic has delayed this work by almost 2 years and it is time to complete the projects our voters approved in 2017.
- Assessing the needs of support staff (paras, bus drivers, custodians, grounds, maintenance, food/nutrition, and other staff) so DCS can effectively implement retention and recruitment strategies
- Oversee and support Buildings & Grounds and Transportation Department leadership to help create a new playbook on how to operate our support systems for our schools. Our directors of both departments are doing a tremendous job making “magic” happen every day. Both will continue leading their departments and we’re blessed to have their leadership at DCS. However, there is no end in the near future to the national staffing shortages. We need to come up with another plan for cleaning buildings, transporting students, and providing other support services. This will require time and focus to look at every aspect of our organization to help us find new models to meet the needs of our students, families, and staff. There’s always the fear that saying “another plan” means privatizing services. We will not be privatizing services. We have great employees and we want to keep our employees. “Another plan” refers to looking at scheduling models and how other organizations have creatively solved the same problems we’re navigating.

**Dexter Early Elementary Complex:** With Craig McCalla’s move to the Principal for Operations, DCS must fill his leadership position at Anchor Elementary. In order to fill this need, Brooke Stidham will assume the Principal Leadership Role for both Anchor and Beacon Elementary Schools. Brooke Stidham is an experienced administrator who, while new to DCS this year, will provide instrumental leadership for our Young 5’s - 2nd grade buildings. To assist Mrs. Stidham, Katie Heikkila will move to Interim Elementary Assistant Principal. Katie Heikkila previously taught early elementary special education and middle school special education. In recent years, Mrs. Heikkila helped create and lead the Dread Strong Summer Program, teaches at the Dexter Alternative Education Program, and has been the primary leader for the Dexter Early Middle College. Her background with programming from our youngest learners to our oldest learners, from special education to general education, and from traditional buildings to alternative education buildings is extremely unique and we’re fortunate to have Mrs. Heikkila at DCS to help us with our youngest learners. The combination of Mrs. Stidham and Mrs. Heikkila is a tremendously strong leadership team.

**Building Capacity with Dexter Early Middle College and Alternative Education:** With Ken Koenig and Katie Heikkila moving to their new roles, DCS has a need to support the Dexter Early Middle College and Alternative Education. Ken Koenig has been serving as the Principal for Alternative Education in addition to his role as DHS Assistant Principal. Meanwhile, Katie Heikkila has been leading the work of the Dexter Early Middle College. Lauren Thompson will be assuming this role of oversight of both of these programs. Mrs. Thompson has been serving as a half-time Creekside Assistant Principal and half-time DHS Graduation Coach. She will continue in her Creekside Assistant Principal role while also taking teaching and Principal leadership roles with Dexter Alternative Education and Dexter Early Middle College under Mollie Sharrar’s Support. Abby Holland, DHS Special Education Department Chair, will serve as the special education liaison between DHS, Alternative Education, and Dexter Early Middle College while continuing her leadership and teaching roles at DHS. Shelley Rychener will pick up Mrs. Thompson’s graduation coach caseload at DHS while also supporting our Alternative Education students.

**Creation of 1 or 2 Utility Player Positions:** Currently, DCS has over 50 open positions varying anywhere from custodians to bus drivers to paraeducators to preschool teachers to aquatics program leadership to substitutes in every area. This new challenge requires some new solutions that provide significant flexibility based on the current needs of the organization. As a baseball fan, I’ve always admired the role of the utility player. We’re looking for 1 or 2 utility players who are interested in working year-round with tremendous variety in their duties and schedules.

**Need #5: The instability of the job market has pressured DCS in some essential areas like pupil accounting, student information systems, and technology supports:**

Student Information Systems Specialist and Student Opportunities: DCS will be adding a Student Information Systems Specialist to become our local expert in Powerschool, Canvas, Summit, SeeSaw and other essential student information systems. As a result of retirements and the volatile job market, we've lost significant expertise in our organization in this area at the same time the need to maximize these systems and build capacity in new staff is at its peak. This new hire will be our local expert while also creating new student opportunities.

Student Technology Team: The Student Information Systems Specialist will also train and facilitate a student technology team at both Mill Creek and Dexter High School. The student technology team members will work during the school day and outside of school hours in a combination of paid and unpaid (during the school day) roles serving the various technology needs of our district. We have students that are interested and more than capable of supporting technology for their peers at DCS. We visited districts in the state and country who support these programs and they've proven to be incredibly valuable to the students involved and the maintenance of district technology resources.

Pupil Accounting and Data Specialist: In the short-term, we are being supported by the Washtenaw Intermediate School District for this work while we hire a new individual in our business office to support a long-term strategy. We're in need of a Payroll/Benefits Coordinator to join our team. This will allow us to make several internal changes to support our business office needs along with our pupil accounting and data needs.

These are a great deal of changes. Dexter has a long-standing tradition of providing personalized education to the residents of this community. Over the years this foundation in the community has driven a great deal of growth. People want to move to Dexter because it's a wonderful place to live and because of our quality schools. Dexter Schools is unique because of the immense community support and the highly dedicated staff that we've been able to hire and retain. Neighboring districts and districts across the country are not fairing nearly as well as Dexter during these challenging times. We are committed to finding solutions in our infrastructure to minimize the impact staff shortages and other challenges have on our students. If we did not adapt and make these moves, we believe it would ultimately degrade the quality of education that our students receive. We believe these moves will not only prevent some of these consequences but ultimately strengthen our district and continue to move us on an upward trajectory. All of these moves have been done voluntarily and all staff members moving to new positions are excited with the new challenges they will be tackling. Obviously, these were not easy decisions for our staff to make.

We want to say thank you to our community for their unending support of the schools and students in this district. If you have an opportunity over the next month please take the time to thank our district staff for all that they've been doing to overcome these challenges. The impact has been minimal on students only because of their dedication and sacrifice. I am so proud to be a part of this community and school district.

Thank you for your continued support and Go Dreads!

Sincerely,

Christopher Timmis, EdD

Superintendent